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# BULLETIN

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### TWO OLD SPANISH CARVINGS

A fine specimen of seventeenth century Spanish wood sculpture, painted in polychrome and gilt on "gesso," spread over carved walnut, has been acquired recently by the Pennsylvania Museum. The group represents the Madonna and Child receiving the homage of the Magi. One of the latter is kneeling at her feet kissing the foot of the Holy Child; one is standing by her side on her right, holding in his hands a golden cruet, and the outline of his form marks, to the right, the outline of the group. On the other side must have stood the third of the Magi whose figure, however, is entirely missing. The block of walnut here has been cut off short, leaving that end of the group unfinished, although it is coated with red color, quite unlike the base, which is delicately decorated in finest polychrome and gilt design on "gesso."

The specimen is said to be of the seventeenth century; it may be earlier. It is two feet ten inches in height, by two feet in width in its present condition. The figures are half life size. But for the missing figure, it is well preserved; and the rich polychrome elaborated in gold, and the general treatment of the figures, are characteristic of the Spanish method of the time.

In Gothic times, the practice was universal of painting and gilding sculptures of all kinds. Stone, wood, ivory, and even metal were colored in an effort at realism inherited from the older civilizations. The painter and sculptor, when not one and the same, worked together. The Flemish artist influenced his European confreres, and his treatment of this polychrome statuary and sculpture is more refined, more suggestive of the close understanding in which worked sculptor and painter. In the early Middle Ages, and to the end of the Gothic period, flesh was painted of one single tint and varnished. Walnut, cedar, cypress, pine and other resinous woods were used by the Spanish carver, notably the pine of Cuença, which was highly esteemed for this purpose. Wood sculpture in Spain had already acquired a prominent position in the thirteenth century, though early pieces betray French influence. Among the earliest art influences that were felt in Spain was the Oriental, or Arab, that came through the Moorish invasion and the prolonged occupation of the territory by the Moors. The Choir Stalls of the thirteenth century preserved in the Madrid Museum are Arab in style. The latter period of Arab art is called the "Mudejar" or transition "Hispano-Mauresque"; the Christian work then being done by Moorish native artists who readily accommodated



SPANISH WOOD CARVING  
Seventeenth Century

themselves to the Gothic style, the earlier Gothic of Spain is a combination of Arabesque, geometric curves, tracery in inlaid work, pendentive and stylistic foliage of an absolutely Oriental character. But in the fourteenth century came the invasion of French, Italian and Flemish artists whose traces may be observed in the great Spanish cathedrals. Then Italy equally with Flanders led in the art development, and to both is due the impulse that inaugurated the movement which sought inspiration directly from nature. The chief propagator in Europe was the Fleming. Nowhere was there such elaboration of ornament, such a masterly use of polychrome decoration, such a change in style from the rich sobriety of, for instance, the altar pieces of Dijon, as in the great Spanish retables of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In the fifteenth century, Dello Delli, famous for his paintings in "gesso" style, is mentioned by Vasari as having entered the service of Juan II of Aragon. The "gesso," or stucco, was spread over the wood carving and painted over, a process, by the way, that goes back to the time of the Egyptian pyramid-builders. Then came the direct influence from Burgundy and Flanders with



SPANISH CARVED RAILING  
Sixteenth Century

the marriage of Maximilian with Joan of Spain; and from Germany in the sixteenth century with Charles V, their son, under whose reign the names of foreign artists found in the Spanish archives, as well as the foreign taste discernible on the great woodwork of the Spanish churches, are proof of their influence.

Architects, and sculptors, painters, enamelers, imagineros, entalladores, estofadores, and innumerable artist-artisans, were employed in the handling of sculpture painting. The sculptured group of walnut or Cuença pinewood was covered with a coat of "gesso." On this modeled stucco-work the other specialists, gilders, painters, varnishers, even stuff-makers, plied their skill to achieve the realism in which the heart of the Spaniard so delighted. The great period of this art was that of Felipe de Borgoña, of Alfonso Berruguete and of

Vigaray, *i. e.*, the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century the art became debased by an overpowering passion for realism, which did not scorn to clothe figures with painted stuffs and additions of metal work, real chains and cords, etc., in which sculpture becomes secondary to its realistic accessories. Yet some wonderful examples survive of the seventeenth century, such as the painted Mater Dolorosa in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In the sixteenth century Spanish taste reacted on Flemish work. Later, when the vandalism of the Reformation destroyed in the Netherlands much of the artistic magnificence of the great cathedrals and churches, Spain continued to use its rich decorative art.

In time from these varied influences was evolved the ornate style known as "plateresco" because of its resemblance to silver work, a varied combination of Gothic and Renaissance with "Mudejar" forms. The impulse that two centuries later carried the rest of Europe into the exaggerations of the "baroque" and the "rococo," carried Spain still further into what the Spaniards themselves call "*estilo monstruoso*," a riotous extravagance which reached its height in the latter part of the seventeenth century under the architect Churriguera, and became known as "*Churrigueresque*," of which, strange as it may seem, Spain is proud.

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But the Flemish influence on many retables of Spain is clear. The doors in the Spitzer collection (1541) still show attachment to the Gothic taste lingering well into the Renaissance, and of these gracefully beautiful influences, the delicate wood-lacework fragment of railing recently presented to the Pennsylvania Museum by Mrs. John Harrison shows a survival. This piece of carved lime-wood was purchased in Spain by the late Stanford White, and was in his possession at the time of his death. It seems to have formed part of the top-railing of some retable, altar screen, or of a choir decoration—most probably the first—and is as beautiful and delicate a piece of sixteenth century wood carving as one is likely to see. The word "retable" properly means the framework of the altar piece <sup>(1)</sup>, often in three sections, the two end pieces folding over the central panel. These altar pieces are called in modern art nomenclature "triptychs," or when in more than three pieces, "polyptychs."

In primitive times the altar was simple and without ornament. The bishop sat behind it, so that it is clear that nothing intervened, neither reredos nor retable. The enclosure of the choir and stalls seems to have been approximately coeval (thirteenth century) with the appearance of great fixed altar pieces, and metal work seems to have been its forerunner. In the fourteenth century a tendency to exaggerate novel ideas in the accessories of church equipment prevailed. The earliest fixed construction corresponding with the later triptychs and polyptychs is the retable of soft limestone in the church of the Carrière St. Denis, Paris, a picture in stone forming a kind of screen and resting on the altar. Nowhere, then, was it a custom to make the altar a fixture resting against the east wall. There was a space between, and the early retable served

(1) Havard, vol. IV., "Retable."

to support and conceal a large reliquary over the ambulatory.<sup>(1)</sup> A tabernacle on the altar itself has, at most, the authority of the last three centuries. As innovations succeeded each other, the retable became an adjunct on which much skill was lavished. It eventually took on architectural proportions, became a towering edifice, as in the cathedral of Seville, with canopied niches and statuary, pendentives, and marvelous traceries of all kinds soaring up to the top of the building, and which reached its highest development in Spain.

Our present interest, however, is in the smaller variety of carved wood retable which formed a framework for pictorial woodwork or painting. Such usually consist of a triptych, or, as in our example, of a polyptych. Sometimes the wings are subdivided. The whole is more or less lavishly carved, some, as the fragmentary specimen that has found its way to the Pennsylvania Museum, present the appearance of veritable lace-work of wood.<sup>(2)</sup>

The wood carving industry in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was so active that everywhere could be seen traceries of carved wood, often gilt and painted; and even in domestic architecture it occupied a prominent place. All paneled work tended to assume an architectural type. Panels, bench ends, coffers and chests were designed after the pattern of window tracery. Panels from French and other chests of this epoch are delicate and often very beautiful, armorial shields being added to the fine ogival decoration. Some such panels in oak wood, sixteen in number, and of the early seventeenth century at latest, may be seen in the Charles Godfrey Leland collection in the Pennsylvania Museum.

In the fifteenth century—Italian “quattrocento”—paint and gilding were much used. Thus we have seen in connection with the painted group of the Magi, that Dello Delli employed this technique on “gesso.” He was so popular that no house of consequence seemed then complete without some specimens of this work in the form of furniture or decoration. The taste for the glorification of ecclesiastic furniture and decoration spread to the palaces and manor houses of France, England and Germany. Great stall work was done for these and the monasteries. Germany and Spain took up the Renaissance in a more Italian spirit than did England or France. Señor J. F. Riaño says: “The brilliant epoch of sculpture in wood belongs to the sixteenth century and was due to the great impulse received from Berreguete and Felipe de Borgóna. The latter was the chief promoter of Italian art in Spain. The choir of the cathedral of Toledo where he worked so much is the finest example in Spain.” In France in the seventeenth century the art of wood carving was to a great extent replaced by marquetterie. The fine work of Boule, Le Brun and others drove it out from the stronghold of fashion. Not so in Spain, where it survived, although in a degenerate form due to an inordinate popular love of the most repellant realism.

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(1) “Wood Sculpture,” by Alfred Maskell, p. 63. Compare “South Kensington Museum Handbook.” By John Hungerford Pollen, pp. 60-83.

(2) “Wood Sculpture,” by Alfred Maskell, p. 64, says: “As a rule Flemish retable works of the fifteenth century show evidence of the perfection of skill attained by the wood carver in the declining years of Gothic feeling, with as much sobriety as the then prevailing taste for exuberance of detail permitted.” This is said in comparison with the highly florid and over-exuberant style of the German work, but will hold good of the Flemish work as it has influenced Spanish art.

The date to be ascribed to the exquisite fragment of railing now under consideration seems to be the second half of the sixteenth century. At least it seems to belong to the order of the Bachelier school of wood carving, of which the magnificent choir of the Cathedral of Auch in the Toulousain is the most superb exponent.<sup>(1)</sup>

S. Y. S.



## TEXTILE FABRICS OF THE INCAS

A small, but choice, collection of Peruvian textiles has been placed on exhibition in the Textile Room, consisting of woolen and cotton fabrics from Peruvian tombs. This collection was presented to the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia nearly thirty years ago by Dr. José Mariano Macedo, of Lima, and has now been deposited in the Museum for safekeeping.

The Peruvian weavers, at the time of the Conquest, had reached an advanced state of perfection in their art. They manufactured the most beautiful fabrics of cotton and the wool of their domesticated animals, such as the llama and alpaca. From the finer wool of the vicuñas and huanacos, which roamed wild through the mountains, they made the finest cloth, which was worn only by the Incas or kings. This was profusely ornamented with colored designs woven into the fabric, representing birds, beasts and human beings. The garments of the wealthier classes were elaborately decorated with fringes and tassels, which sometimes represented human heads with long flowing beards, or entire figures with elaborately woven accessories.

The feather workers also produced the most exquisite fabrics from the beautifully colored plumage which was plucked from the gorgeous birds of the Peruvian forests. The feathers were usually attached to a solid ground of cloth, completely covering it and over-lapping each other like the scales of a fish, so that the delicate tips alone remained visible. The natural colors were cunningly worked into ornamental designs and intricate mosaics, to be worn by the members of the nobility, or used as hangings in their houses.

The group of tapestries now on exhibition consists of fragments of garments, and includes a complete *unco*, a short armless shirt of cotton cloth with elaborate geometrical decoration woven in brown and white. The majority of the specimens are of wool, probably of the alpaca, with a warp of cotton, while some of the finer and more delicate pieces are composed entirely of the wool of the vicuña. One of the most striking peculiarities of these fabrics is the separation of the colored designs by vertical slits, which run with the warp, presenting a remarkable resemblance to some of the Coptic weaves of Egypt.

In his interesting article on the "Textile Fabrics of Ancient Peru," Prof. William H. Holmes, of Washington, describes the ancient method of weaving, as follows: "The Peruvian workman stretched his series of warp threads side by side, usually twenty or thirty to the inch, between two holding rods, and

(1) Compare plate LI of Maskell's already quoted work on wood sculpture, giving portions of the choir.